Alhassanain (p) Network for Islamic Heritage and Thought

Islam versus Feminism

What is feminism? What does it have in common with Islam? What is the position of the Islamic law regarding the feminist issues? What is considered oppression from Islamic point of view?

The present book will answer all the above mentioned questions and at the same time it will clarify the role of the women in Islam.

This book is also a good source of information and logical explanation for all the people out there who keep insisting that women are oppressed and that the Islamic rules should be changed.

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In The Name of Allah

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Introduction

Feminism has radically altered Western culture in the latter half of the twentieth century. Perhaps no other social movement has wrought such profound changes in social mores and attitudes. Sexual revolution and liberation meant that sexual relations should be freed of the constraints associated with traditional Christian virtue.

The gay rights movement extended the demand for freedom regarding sexual relations to homosexuality. Moral censorship was relaxed in print media, cinema and television, and pornography burgeoned. General standards of taste in speech and behavior devolved in response to the dictates of prints, films and broadcasts. Family ties were weakened and the divorce rate soared. In Scandinavia it is estimated that roughly half of all infants are born to unwed mothers.

It was a bewilderingly abrupt relaxation of the restraints of centuries... The sudden sexual revolution was not just the lifting of censorship. Landlords and hostellers, long forbidden by law to accommodate unwed couples, could now be told not to ask personal questions....The courts were left facing stubborn new problems regarding marital or quasi-marital responsibilities and titles to property. Deeper dislocations of a social kind are being wrought by the weakening of the family.[1]

At the same time, women became an increasingly visible force in the workplace, the academy and the political arena, the most outspoken among who have been feminists.

The changes mentioned are not solely the work of feminists. The anti-establishment attitudes among the youth of the 1960's and the popularity enjoyed by the left contributed to these changes and also to support for feminism itself.

Nevertheless, feminist thought has been a major force in the social upheaval in the West since the sixties that continues to exert its influence, and among the explicit goals feminists have advocated have been the abolition of the family and traditional gender roles, to which ends they have championed homosexuality and promiscuity.

Feminists have managed to set standards for the use of 'non-sexist language' in most universities and publishing houses, the most visible result of which has been an explosion of the population of feminine pronouns.

They have also managed to enforce their own preferences in areas as diverse as script writing, advertising and public employment practices. They have introduced a popular jargon in terms of which important social issues are debated, and they have begun to export their ideology abroad.

Feminism began to establish itself in areas outside the West through is use by colonial powers to undermine local culture in the areas under their control, and although it has met with some resistance, particularly among Muslims, there continues to be a great deal of confusion about what feminism is, about its goals, history and branches.

In what follows a brief introduction to feminism and its history is presented, with particular attention to philosophical and theological issues relevant to Islam. There follows a comparison between feminist and Islamic

doctrines in which their utter incompatibility is elucidated. Finally, some observations are drawn with regard to the Islamic women's movement.

Note

1. W. v. Quine, Quiddities (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 207-208.

A Brief History Of Feminism

Feminism Distinguished From Other Women's Movements

Women have been oppressed ever since the invention of human sin, and for nearly as long they have been engaged in the attempt to free themselves from oppression. The attempts made to end the injustices done to women, particularly when these injustices are institutionalized, may be called women's movements.

In this sense, Islam may be considered a women's movement, because it includes a divinely ordained program for the eradication of injustice done to women. Western women, however, usually fail to recognize Islam as a women's movement, and they restrict the term 'women's movement' to the products of Western culture designed to change the status of women in society.

The industrial revolution of the nineteenth century and the gradual process of urbanization brought women together in the labor force outside the framework of the family, whereas in agrarian society, women worked with family members. At the same time, women were excluded from politics.

The rights of man proclaimed by the French Revolution were limited to males. During the Enlightenment, women began to demand 'emancipation', freedom from dependency on men, educational opportunity and political rights.

Feminists would go on to make more radical claims, including among the most prominent of these: legalized abortion on demand, free love or sexual liberation, complete equality with men and the abolition of differentiation of the roles of the sexes. Feminism is often defined as a movement seeking full equality of rights with men, but it is important to emphasize that the equality of rights sought by feminists goes far beyond equality under the law.

Feminism aims at the eradication of any difference in social roles based on gender difference, and this is what distinguishes it from other women's movements.[1] Nevertheless, the feminist movement includes within its ranks writers and activists who differ on many fundamental issues in philosophy, politics and morals.

What unites them is the social ideal of the elimination of traditional gender roles. Feminism may thus be defined as a branch of the women's movement that aims at the elimination of traditional gender roles. However, confusion exists about the use of the term 'feminism', for there are writers who fail to distinguish feminism from the more general women's movement.

The focus of attention in what follows will be on feminist philosophy (including political philosophy) and feminist theology, however, among the important feminist writings there are also works on psychoanalysis, jurisprudence and literary criticism.

Feminism And Socialism

Perhaps the first use of the term 'feminism' was in the early nineteenth century by the socialist, Charles Fourier (1772--1837). The followers of another early socialist, Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), introduced the

androgyny principle, according to which there was a mixed male and female being at the beginning of history.

(Muslims will find it amusing to learn that Saint-Simon's disciples went to Turkey to seek the female savior after having lost hope of finding a truly free woman in Europe!) Socialist feminists advocated the abolition of any division of labor along sex specific lines, and called for quotas whereby half of all the positions in every field of employment are to be filled by women.

With the domination of Marxism among the various forms of socialism, socialist feminism also came to be dominated by Marxist feminism, first elaborated in 1844 by Engels in Der Ursprung der Familie (The Origen of the Family).

In this work Engels demands the abolition of the family, uniform integration of men and women into the labor force and the communal raising of children in order to achieve equality among all people and an end to the domination of one person over another.

Although socialism has lost popularity in recent years and Marxism, in particular, seems on the verge of extinction, a political left continues to survive, even in America, especially in academia. As the academic left has also welcomed feminism, so too, Marxist ideas continue to find expression in the writings of important feminist leaders.

Perhaps the most notable lesson feminists have learned from Marxists is their polemical style. Articles on feminism, even those printed in such reputable works as the Encyclopedia of Ethics and the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy do not merely describe the work of feminists; they actively advocate the abolition of traditional gender roles for the sake of the liberation of women.

Like Marxists, feminists have also adopted an ideologically charged rhetoric with which to declaim their analyses and polemics. Often the language used is directly inspired by Marxist terminology, even when Marxism is itself explicitly rejected.

More orthodox Marxist and socialist feminists argue that the oppression of women has its roots in the class system, and that the system must be overturned in order to liberate women. Feminist critics of Marxist feminism have argued that men exploit the labor of women through housework regardless of the class system, so that the class analysis is insufficient and must be supplemented by an analysis of exploitation based on gender.

Feminist Philosophy

Certainly the most famous of feminist philosophers of the twentieth century was Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). In 1949 she published Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex) in which she elaborated an existentialist/Marxist analysis of the relations between men and women. As existentialist thought emphasizes the radical freedom of the individual to arbitrarily choose his essence, de Beauvoir makes the dramatic claim that one's gender is also a matter choice. To the extent that biology would seem to indicate otherwise, she finds biology degrading.

Biology gives men a freedom from reproductive processes that women lack, so she sees femininity as an obstacle to being truly human. Later

feminists have criticized de Beauvoir for her disparagement of female anatomy and for advocating that women take men's roles in society.

Nevertheless, it is generally acknowledged that her work set out what would become major themes of later feminist writing: the difference between sex and gender (biological and social sexual characteristics), concern with autobiography seen as a political statement, and the need to draw upon various disciplines in the analysis of gender roles.

While de Beauvoir's feminism has much in common with the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, more recent feminists have drawn from the philosophies of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida to apply the methods of genealogical analysis and deconstruction to issues pertaining to gender, including women's roles in society, women's psychology, and the political oppression of women.

Feminists, however, have not merely made use of philosophical trends for their own purposes; they have also elaborated positions in virtually all the major areas of philosophy. Hence, there are feminist readings of the history of philosophy, feminist philosophy of science, feminist epistemology, feminist social and political philosophy, feminist ethics and even feminist ontology. The Society for Women in Philosophy was founded in 1972 whose journal, Hypatia, publishes articles on feminist philosophy.

In the history of philosophy, feminists have concerned themselves with two major projects. First, a number of works have been written that aim to disclose bias against women or gender stereotypes in the writings of Western philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to John Rawls. Descartes has been a particular target of these sorts of critique.[2]

Second, there has been an attempt to emphasize the importance of women philosophers throughout history. A major accomplishment in this program was the publication of Mary Ellen Waith's three-volume A History of Women Philosophers.[3]

Feminist philosophy of science and epistemology has for the most part sought to refute claims to the objectivity of science and knowledge, and to identify gender bias in the works of scientists and philosophers.

Modeled on the Marxist idea that culture is a superstructure that reflects class interests, feminist 'standpoint theories' advocates the idea that a specifically feminine view of the world is possible when science is practiced from a woman's perspective.[4]

A current topic of debate in feminist philosophy of science and epistemology is whether emphasis on the uniqueness of the female perspective implies relativism or a denial of objective truth.

Feminist approaches to ethics place a strong emphasis on politics. They are more concerned with power than goodness, and often provide criticism of the ways in which traditional ethics contributes to the subordination and oppression of women.

Allison Jagger, for example, suggests that feminist ethics should provide guides to action that will subvert the subordination of women.[5]

Lesbian feminists have proposed a feminist ethics based onthe proposition that women cannot enter a relationship with men without becoming victims of subjugation, and that lesbian communities should

construct their own ethics on the basis of a quest for freedom and self-identity rather than the good, and choice rather than duty.[6]

Lesbians have played an important role in the feminist movement, and although not all feminists are advocates of lesbianism, feminists generally condone lesbianism as an implication of the attack on traditional gender roles.[7]

Feminists have also been critical of those who have proposed a particularly feminine ethics. For example, the renowned moral psychologist, Carol Gilligan, has proposed that an ethics of care is more suitable to explain the moral development of girls than the ethics of justice used by her mentor, Lawrence Kohlberg, to explain the moral development of boys.[8]

Feminists respond that Gilligan places too much emphasis on the virtue of caring for women because this may serve to support rather than undermine established gender differentiation.[9] Likewise, feminists reject the feminine ethics proposed by ethicists who focus on the moral insights to be gained through an examination of maternal relationships.

Feminists argue that by giving primacy to women's roles as mothers, feminine ethics fails to encourage women to gain the traits necessary to overturn patriarchy and gender bias.

An important part of the feminist polemic is the insistence that traditional gender roles based on sexual differences is wrong, that patriarchy is a form of oppression and subjugation of women, that women have been unjustly marginalized and ignored, that women's rights have been violated.

So, there is a moral demand in feminism for the subversion of patriarchal social arrangements, for the rewriting of history, for the critique of every element of culture dominated by a male perspective, including (to mention but a few) art, psychology, theology and ethics itself.

Feminist Political Theory

Feminist political thought begins with Marxism. According to Marx and Engels, it is the class system that lies at the source of all oppression, and the family is a social institution reflective of that oppressive system. The call for the abolition of the family is inseparable from the call for the abolition of the capitalist system and its replacement by communism.

While some feminists have endorsed a more or less orthodox Marxist view of the family, others have sought to place gender roles at the foundation of their political thought. Instead of seeing the family as a reflection of the underlying capitalist system of production, they view capitalism as a result of the oppressive nature of patriarchy.

Kate Millet, an activist in the 'Women's Liberation Movement' of the late 1960's, accordingly claimed that the most entrenched oppressive structure in human society is not capitalism, but male dominance.

The development of feminism is often divided into three waves, each of which is associated with a characteristic type of political demand. The first wave is said to include the emancipation and socialist movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In addition to Engels' The Origin of the Family (1884) and Mill's The Subjection of Women (1869), the writings and speeches of the Russian born American anarchist, Emma Goldman (1869-1940), are included among the

major philosophical statements of feminist thought in this period, which is sometimes extended to include de Beauvoir's work, as well.

Feminism is thus foremost a social and political movement, and it is not surprising to find that its core philosophical expressions take the form of social-political philosophy.

The feminism of the 1960's and 70's is called 'second wave'. It is characterized by the radicalization of the movement. While first-wave feminists called for an end to legal discriminations against women so that there would be no legal difference between the status of men and women, second-wave feminists came to view the concepts of male and female social roles to be bound up with patriarchy and called for the elimination of both.

The third-wave feminism of the 1980's and 90's is marked by a rejection of any sort of essentialism. Earlier feminists had made general pronouncements about women, their exploitation and how they should go about liberation. Third-wave feminists argued that a natural implication of the rejection of traditional ideas about gender is the realization of the diversity of feminine types among women of different races, classes, nationalities and sexual orientations.

Third-wave feminists promote a vision of liberation in which there is a wide ranging plurality rather than any single ideal of the liberated woman. Liberation is seen as diversity in the options available for sexual relations and gender roles.

Another division of types of feminism is fourfold: liberal, radical, socialist and postmodernist. Liberal feminism has its roots in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft (1757-1797) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) who demanded equal rights for women.

In the 1960's liberal feminists in the United States fought for women's rights to abortion on demand, support for working mothers, the universal availability of childcare centers, and greater representation in government, business and the academy.

This led to calls for 'affirmative action', legal measures to promote the hiring of women and minorities in order to redress past injustices done to them. While liberal feminists emphasize the common humanity of men and women as a basis for equality of rights, radical feminists celebrate the differences between the experiences of men and women.

They argue that women's experiences have been suppressed and that as a result all aspects of culture, from literature and science to politics and law, betray the biases of and in favor of male sensibilities. Socialist feminism has been discussed already, and post-modernist feminism seems to be another term for third wave feminism.

Feminist Theology

Feminist theology began to establish itself in the 1970's.During that decade the journal Concilium was launched to promote feminist theology, the first conferences were held to discuss feminist theology in the U.S., the World Council of Churches held a conference in Berlin on sexism, and Mary Daly published Beyond God the Father.[10]

Like liberation theology, to which it is closely linked both historically and theoretically, feminist theology draws upon and criticizes Marxist

thought. Religion is interpreted in such a way that its primary function is seen as liberation, liberation of the poor in liberation theology and of women in feminist theology. Feminist theology may be divided into moderate and radical tendencies.

The moderate tendencies advocate reinterpretations of the established religions to purge them of what are considered sexist or androcentric elements. The radical tendencies advocate a rejection of patriarchal religious thought in favor of the worship of one or more goddesses or even witchcraft.

One of the areas of scholarship to which moderate feminists have devoted their attention is the history of the church. Feminists such as Elisabeth Schlssler Fiorenza argue that the early Christians were egalitarians, but that as the Church hierarchy developed, bias against women became institutionalized, and infected many subsequent theological discussions.[11]

The method employed by Schlssler Fiorenza is broadly sociological, and draws upon liberation theology. The conclusions reached are relatively moderate: the feminist critique is to lead to Church reform.[12]

Feminists who focus on psychoanalytic methods draw more radical conclusions. Following C. G. Jung, feminists such as Christa Mulack hold that the unconscious, which is associated with the feminine, is primary, and that male dominated religion has suppressed the feminine in favor of the male. On this view, the Hebrew prophets are seen as rebels against "the Great Goddess".

Feminist theologians who concentrate on psychology tend to reject equality feminism in favor of a feminism in which the feminine is paramount, or gynocentric feminism. They also tend to reject Christianity rather than call for its reform. While the majority of feminist theologians appear to be comparatively moderate, the radicals constitute a very influential minority.

The most famous feminist theologian, a radical advocate of gynocentric feminism sometimes referred to as the 'foster mother of feminist theology', is the former Catholic nun, Mary Daly. She was the first American woman to earn a doctorate in Catholic theology at the University of Fribourg (in 1963).

Her first major work, The Church and the Second Sex,[13] echoes many of the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, but applies them to Church history and theology. She calls for Church reform and a reinterpretation of Christianity along the lines of equality feminism. Her most famous work, however, is Beyond God the Father.[14]

In this work Daly argues that the Christian concept of God is irredeemably androcentric, and she coins the often-quoted slogan of feminist theology, "If God is male, then the male is God."[15] The male dominance in Christian thought is further demanded by Trinitarian doctrine, according to which the male Christ is 'God the Son', the second person of the Trinity, and the first person of the Trinity is 'God the Father'.

Instead, Daly proposes that God be considered in a non-personal manner as the ground of all being, as taught by Paul Tillich. Daly's next major work,

Gyn/Ecology,[16] makes a complete break from Christianity with the rejection of God in favor of the Goddess and the glorification of witchcraft as the esoteric knowledge of an earlier matriarchal culture. She also reasserts her advocacy of lesbianism and rejection of the complementarity of the masculine and the feminine. This was followed by the publication of an even more radical work, Pure Lust,[17] in which lust is turned into a virtue through which 'complete empowerment' is to be achieved.

Perhaps the most famous French feminist who has written on theology is Luce Irigaray. She writes from a postmodernist perspective critical of equality feminism. Her ideal is not a society in which gender differences are eliminated, but one in which a new femininity emerges from the experiences of women freed from male domination.

Liberation has theological implications. Like Mary Daly, she opposes Christianity for its masculine conception of God, particularly as expressed in the concept of the Trinity. Although she argues that women need religion and divinity, the idea of God presented in the revealed religions is rejected.

Respect for God is possible as long as no one realizes that he is a mask concealing the fact that men have taken sole possession of the divine, of identity, and of kinship. Once we give this whole issue the attention and serious consideration it deserves, however, it becomes obvious that God is being used by men to oppress women and that; therefore, God must be questioned and not simply neutered in the current pseudo liberal way.[18]

She claims that only a “God in the feminine gender” can maintain women's freedom and fulfillment “as individuals and as members of a community.”[19]

While most feminist theologians do not advocate the goddess theologies suggested by Daly and Irigaray, they are moderate only in comparison to extreme views such as these. So-called moderate feminist theologians accept much of the general orientation of feminism: the rejection of gender complementarity, the acceptance of 'non-traditional families' consisting of homosexual partners with or without children and unwed mothers with children, and a hermeneutic based on the attempt to uncover gender bias.

They advocate the rewriting of religious texts in such a way that all masculine references to God are replaced by neuter or masculine and feminine references, so that where the Bible refers to God as “our Father”, the feminists replace this by “our Mother and Father”.

While this may seem superficial, moderate feminist theologians tend to interpret the basic message of Christianity as a call to struggle for liberation, particularly, the liberation of women from male domination, which entails the dismantling of the traditional family.

Notes

1. The Duden German dictionary defines feminism as a “direction within the women's movement that strives for a new self-understanding by women and the abolition of the traditional separation of roles.” Duden 1, 20th ed. (Mannheim: 1991), p. 267.

Cited in and corroborated with other references to leading feminists in Germany in Manfred Hauke, God or Goddess? (San Francisco: 1995), p. 20-21. This article is deeply indebted to Hauke's book, and all the references to German feminists as well as much other material is taken from Hauke's citations or summarized from his discussions.

2. See A. Nye, Philosophy and Feminism: At the Border (New York:1995).

3. Mary Ellen Waith, A History of Women Philosophers 3 vols.(Dordrecht: 1987-1991).

4. See Sandra Harding, Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives (Ithaca: 1991).

5. Allison Jagger, “Feminist Ethics”, in L. Becker and C. Becker, eds., The Encyclopedia of Ethics(New York: Garland, 1992).

6. Sarah Lucia Hoagland, Lesbian Ethics (Palo Alto: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988).

7. See Christa Mulack, Natirlich Weiblich (Stuttgart: 1990).

8. Carol Gilligan, In a Different voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

9. Shiela Mullett, “Shifting Perspectives: A New Approach to Ethics”, in L. Code, S. Mullett, C. Overall, eds., Feminist Perspectives: Philosophical Essays on Method and Morals (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1988).

10. Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: 1973).

11. See Elisabeth Schlssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (New York: 1983).

12. Other moderate Christian feminists are Elisabeth Grossman, Rosemary Reuther, Catharina Halkes and Elisabeth Moltman-Wendel.

13. (New York: 1968).

14. Mary Daly (1973).

15. Daly (1973), 19.

16. Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Meta-ethics of Radical Feminism(Boston: 1978).

17. Mary Daly, Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy (Boston: 1984).

18. Luce Irigaray, Sexes and Genealogies, tr. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), v.

19. Irigaray (1993), 72.

The Islamic Opposition to Feminism

Although Islam and feminism are not completely without common ground, the values and principles of Islam and feminism are generally contrary. Both condemn the oppression of women. Both insist that women may own their own property and dispose of it as they wish. In theology, both reject the symbol of 'Father' for God.

However, the feminist view that patriarchy is equivalent to the oppression of women is not compatible with Islam. The feminist idea that traditional gender roles are to be eliminated is opposed by the Islamic idea that the primary role of woman (after that of servant of God) is that of wife and mother.

Theologically, while feminists view the divine as 'Mother and Father' or as goddess, Islam considers the parent metaphor inappropriate for divinity and categorically denies the existence of gods and goddesses.

The Conflicting Ideals Of Islam And Feminism

While feminism rejects any sort of complementarity of the sexes, Islam emphasizes it through the accentuation of different social roles for men and women. Feminism is critical of the institution of marriage because it leads to the subordination of women, while Islam strongly recommends marriage for both men and women, and the marriage institution in Islam is one in which husbands and wives have clearly distinct responsibilities and duties. The leadership role for men is taken for granted in Islam, while feminists consider it oppression.

Traditional Islamic thought has celebrated the hierarchical structure of the universe as a pointer toward the divine, and has seen echoes of this in the relationship of mind and body, spirit and psyche, king and subject, master and slave, and man and woman. This does not mean that Islam condones all such relationships as found in traditional societies, but it does mean that relationships of subordination and hierarchy are not for that very reason to be considered evil, as feminists hold they are.

According to Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, the “crux of patriarchal theology” is “the dominance implied in the relationship between mind and body: will over the unconscious, history over nature, man over woman.”[1]

Rosemary Reuther displays the same attitude: “Sexual symbolism is foundational to the perception of order and relationship that has been built up in cultures. The psychic organization of consciousness, the dualistic view of the self and the world, the hierarchical concept of society, the relation of humanity and nature, and of God and creation-all these relationships have been modeled on sexual dualism.”[2]

As Hauke points out, “The implicit supposition here is that subordination and inferiority are identical and that they signify 'division' and 'rape'.”[3]

Islam is the obedient subordination of man to God. In his submission to God, however, man is not oppressed by God, but perfected. While feminists consider the condition of women to be better when they have more choices, because they hold that the good is the free expression and satisfaction of

free ranging desire, the good in Islam is viewed as the annihilation of the self with its desires in divinity.

This divine encounter is approached through the attainment of virtue and the conquest of the illicit desires of the self.

Complementarity, the Family and Sexuality

Europeans have condemned Islam for its acceptance of human sexuality and sensuality and for its repression of the same. When Victorian morals dominated Europe, Islam was seen as a naughty religion offering its believers promises of sensual delight in the afterlife.

When European morals changed and Freudian ideas had been popularized, Islam was condemned for the limitations it places on sexual relations. In feminist writing, both attitudes are expressed. To a certain extent, this may be due to different ideas about sexuality current among feminists.

Some feminists, for example, consider prostitution a legitimate form of labor, and prefer the term 'sexual worker’, while other feminists consider prostitution and the 'sex industry' as manifestations of the degradation of women at the hands of the patriarchic system.

Some feminists call for changes in Islamic societies so that women may be given more sexual license, while others call for greater restrictions to be placed upon men.

Islam clearly recognizes and accepts human sexuality. Sexual pleasure in itself is not considered evil, as it is in some Christian texts. Nevertheless, Islam places strict constraints on sexual behavior. These constraints differ for men and women. Men are permitted to have more than one wife simultaneously, while women are not permitted to have more than one husband at any one time.

It must be admitted that Muslim men sometimes abuse this and other permissions granted them by Islamic law to do injustice to women. Feminists conclude from this that Islamic law is oppressive to women. However, in the context of the laws governing sexual relations in other societies, whether liberal, communist or Christian, some men also take advantage of the opportunities they find there to oppress women.

Should we then conclude that all laws governing sexual relations are oppressive to women? Even if a society were constructed in which there were absolutely no laws governing sexual relations, some men would still oppress women, probably even more than they do in Muslim societies. The problem would seem to reside not in the law, but in the morals of those who would abuse it for selfish purposes.

With all the freedoms and rights granted to women in the US, the claim that women are better off than they were earlier is dubious. Statistics show that more women live in poverty than before. Divorce has been made easy, and custody of children is normally awarded to mothers, while the support that could be provided by other family members has been undermined with the erosion of the family.

Islamic law functions to preserve the family structure through patriarchal hierarchy in which a base line of duties toward women is clearly drawn. Furthermore, there is considerable room for women to maneuver within the

framework of Islamic family law to prevent their husbands from arbitrarily divorcing them or remarrying.

This seems far better for women than the Western customs in which the average duration of marriage is five years and in which it is common for men to keep mistresses.

The Role Of Women In Islam

The most important and most emphasized role for women mentioned in Islamic sources is that of wife and mother, but the role of woman in Islam is by no means limited to this. Women may be entrepreneurs, as was Khadijah, the first wife of Muhammad (s) and the first convert to Islam.

They may also take a strong political stand even leading to martyrdom, as did Fatimah, the daughter of Muhammad (s), wife of Imam 'Ali and mother of Imams Hasan and Husayn, peace be with all of them.

Some positions, however, such as leading prayers for men, are considered inappropriate for women.

Westerners often assume that because social relations between men and women are restricted in Islamic societies in ways that seem strange to them, that Muslim women are not socially and politically active. The following anecdote reported by W. Morgan Shuster regarding events in Tehran in 1911provides some indication of how mistaken this assumption is.

With the dark days when doubts came to be whispered as to whether the Medjlis would stand firm [against Russian threats], the Persian women, in their zeal for liberty and their ardent love for their country . . . supplied the answer. Out from their walled courtyards and harems marched three hundred of that weak sex, with the flush of undying determination in their cheeks. They were clad in their plain black robes with the white nets of their veils dropped over their faces. Many held pistols under their skirts or in the folds of their sleeves. Straight to the Medjlis they went, and, gathered there, demanded of the President that he admit them all. What the grave deputies of the Land of the Lion and the Sun may have thought at this strange visitation is not recorded. The President consented to receive a delegation of them. In his reception-hall they confronted him, and lest he and his colleagues should doubt their meaning, these cloistered Persian mothers, wives and daughters exhibited threateningly their revolvers, tore aside their veils, and confessed their decision to kill their own husbands and sons, and leave behind their own dead bodies, if the deputies wavered in their duty to uphold the liberty and dignity of the Persian people and nation.[4]

This is not an isolated incident. Women in Muslim societies are and always have been active in social and political affairs, even if they have rarely taken publicly visible leadership roles. A careful reading of the Qur'an shows that this is no historical accident.

God directly addresses women through the revelation of the Qur'an by assuring them that their deeds will not go unrewarded and by offering as exemplars women who have courageously taken positions in unfavorable social conditions, not however, to secure their own rights or interests, but in obedience to God.

Thus Mary, peace be with her, is rebuked by her people for having the child Jesus out of wedlock. She agreed to have the child when visited by the

angel out of obedience to God. In response to the taunts directed against her, Mary offers no excuses but points to the child prophet, who miraculously speaks to them.[5] The wife of Pharaoh refuses to obey her husband and king in his idolatry because of her acceptance of the message of the prophet Moses.[6]

The primary roles accorded to women in Islam are those of wife and mother, and it is precisely these roles with which feminists are most uncomfortable. Feminists are concerned with 'liberating' women from expectations that they should marry and have children.

They see progress for women in terms of employment opportunities, income, opportunities to experiment with non-traditional sexual relations and political power. Although Islam does not bar women from wealth and power, it places greater emphasis on marriage and the family.

It seems that this accords with the interests of the vast majority of the women of the world. Although they are not averse to wealth and power, their primary concerns tend to center around marriage and the family. Islam dignifies these primary concerns while feminism tends to undermine them.

Of course, the most important role for woman in Islam is no different than that assigned to men-servant of God. It is as servants of God that Muslim women and men take on the roles of mothers and fathers and wives and husbands, buyers and sellers, teachers and pupils, workers and employers, etc.

Notes

1. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, “Werkstatt Ohne Angst” Forum Religion 3!1987, 34. Cited in Hauke (1995), 95.

2. Rosemary Reuther, New Woman-New Earth (New York: 1975), 3. Cited in Hauke (1995), 96.

3. Hauke (1995), 96.

4. W. Morgan Shuster, The Strangling of Persia (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 1987), 197-198.

5. (19:27-30).

6. (66:11).

Islamic Opposition To Socialism

Socialism calls for the destruction of tradition and its replacement by a radically egalitarian system.

The socialist distributive system is unIslamic because it ignores differentiation arising as a result of contract and trade, but considers only the pattern of distribution.

Socialist materialism is incompatible with the ant materialism of Islamic ideology.

The idea that the means of production must be in the hands of the masses, or the party that represents them, is contrary to the idea of hierarchical rule found in Islam, which, though it may be for the benefit of the people, does not give the people any right to the means of production.

More specifically, with regard to feminism, where socialism opposes the family as an expression of exploitative class relations, Islam seeks to support and encourage the building and maintenance of families. Family ties are exceedingly important in Islam. So Islam and socialism are diametrically opposed on this point.

All forms of feminism with socialist leanings are in agreement with the aim of ultimate destruction of the family. All reject any sort of gender differentiation and complementarity. As such, they are fundamentally opposed to Islam.

Many of the forms of feminism that reject socialism, nevertheless retain the absolute egalitarian and anti-family principles of the socialists, and so Islam will oppose them no less than it does more orthodox forms of socialism.

Islamic Opposition To The Philosophical Attitude Of Feminism

The moral values espoused by feminists, whether equality feminism or gynocentric feminism, are not values supported by Islam. In feminism the goal is absolute freedom to choose to live as one pleases without interference of social customs or regulations assigning specified roles to men and women. Justice in Islam means everything being in its proper place, not absolute equality, let alone feminine superiority in all areas.

The determination of justice in Islam requires the wisdom and insight that result from study of and living according to the patterns set by the Prophet (s) and Imams (as) .

Philosophical thought in Islam, like all the aspects of Islamic culture, is a reflection of taw ld. All things are seen as having an underlying unity as effects of God as ultimate cause, or as modes of His self-disclosure.

Reason is championed as a vehicle for understanding taw ld. Feminist philosophical thought, on the other hand, moves in the opposite direction. Instead of searching for some underlying unity in being or causation or appearance and reality, feminism is occupied with the discovery of conflict; feminism sees hidden forms of subjugation lurking beneath virtually every text, every theory, every social or cultural phenomenon.

It displaces the idea of a harmony between the masculine and feminine with outrage against the oppression of the female through gender

differentiation. Reason itself is considered a tool of oppression, and reliance on reason is disparagingly called 'logo-centrism.'

The ideal of the philosopher in Islamic culture is of one who has gained victory over the wiles of his base soul through the employment of the intellect. The intellect dominates over the soul of the philosopher, who thereby loses interest in what is considered desirable by worldly standards.

The ideal of the feminist thinker one finds in feminist writing is of a woman who is preoccupied with her own experiences and who uses those experiences to uncover the roots of women's oppression in gender differences which she overcomes through an effort of desire unconstrained by patriarchy.

The ideal of Islam is nearness to God, and social relations are governed by a spirit of obedience to God, in which justice is conceived as a proper balance that satisfies the demands of moral conscience, social custom, and the explicit commands of God.

In feminism, by contrast, all of theology is subordinated to its program of liberation, in which the ideal is a social freedom that makes its own absolute moral claims on behalf of equality and the abolition of gender based differences in social role, that demands a revolution in social customs, and that rejects the explicit commands of God.

Islamic Opposition To Feminist Political Theory

Islamic political theory sees injustice in terms of rebellion against God. It is because rulers usurp authority for the satisfaction of their own desires instead of submitting to the divine will that they perpetrate injustices on other people, their own subjects and their neighbors. The sin against God is primary, and this is expressed in injustice to others.

This political view is magnified in Shi'i theology. The dispute over the caliphate arises because some were unwilling to submit to the choice of God for leadership. All accept that 'Ali was designated for some sort of leadership role, but the supporters of other choices for caliph refused to accept this designation or its extension to the realm of politics.

With this refusal, for whatever reason, a spirit of something quite foreign to the complete submission required by Islam is displayed. The primary sin is that of disobedience to God. The injustices done in the violent attempts to hold power are the natural consequence of this sin.

Feminist political theory, on the other hand, sees the primary sin in the subjection of women to male authority. All other social injustice is interpreted on the basis of this, and the elimination of any subordination of women to men is seen as the key to the elimination of all other forms of injustice.

Islam aims at bringing the human ever nearer to the divine. Thus, the aim of the political order, in Islam, is the creation of an environment conducive to the worship of and obedience to God through which proximity to Him is gained.

This requires the establishment of a condition of social harmony and balance in which each component of society, its institutions, practices, cultural forms, discourse and individual members, each find their fitting place to approach divinity in complete submission.

The aim of the political order in feminism, by contrast, never gets beyond freedom to violate the constraints of traditional gender roles, forming relationships and even communities without any form of hierarchy, subordination, or gender differentiation such as is found in the families of virtually all cultures.

Islamic Opposition To Feminist Theology

Since there is no holy trinity in Islam, no God the Father nor God the Son, the concept of God in Islam is not as gender specific as it is in Christianity. In the Arabic of the Qur'an, masculine pronouns are used to refer to God, but this provides little leverage for the development of the sort of critique feminists have leveled against the Christian concept of God.

Goddess feminism, on the other hand, is clearly incompatible with the teachings of Islam. The God of Islam is not a woman, and He has no daughters.

Theological discussions of the attributes of God indicate very clearly, however, that there are feminine and masculine aspects of divinity and even that the feminine has priority.[1]

Now, as Wolfson has argued in his study of Islamic theology,[2] discussions of the names and attributes of God play a role in Islamic theology comparable to discussions of the Trinity among Christian theologians.

So, not only is the Islamic concept of the divinity free of the male bias present in the concept of the Trinity, but the closest thing we can find in Islam to the idea of relations internal to divinity discussed in Christianity in terms of the Trinity is the idea of the divine names and attributes in which not only is there an absence of bias against the feminine, but the feminine is dignified as paramount. God's mercy precedes His wrath.[3]

Feminism As Cultural Imperialism

Feminism has long been a favorite weapon in the arsenal of the colonialist powers. The colonialists used feminism in order to berate the cultures of the lands they governed, to win local support for Europeanization, and to provide moral justification for imperialism.[4]

Europeans understood Islam very poorly prior to the twentieth century. The misunderstandings had been entrenched since the crusades when a disinformation campaign was employed to bolster the war effort. One of the aspects of this campaign concerned gender in Islam.

Islam was condemned because of polygamy, sensuality, and the imprisonment of women behind the veil. Even in the eighteenth century many Europeans believed that Islam teaches that women have no souls.

During the nineteenth century, the European colonialist powers, particularly the English, built upon these common misunderstandings to justify a program for the eradication of Muslim culture. Victorian anthropology contributed to the idea that the culmination of human evolution was to be found in England, and that it was therefore natural and fitting for the British to rule over other peoples.

At the same time, a vocal feminist movement was emerging in England itself. The colonialists made use of the arguments of English feminists in

their own rhetoric to claim that because Muslims oppressed their women, their mores had to be replaced by 'civilized' European mores.

Colonial feminism was thus used against other cultures in the service of colonial rule, particularly against Muslim cultures, but in different variations it was also used against local cultures in India and Africa.

The colonialists argued that the fundamental reason for the comprehensive backwardness of Muslim societies was the prevalence of Islamic customs pertaining to women. The veil became the symbol for the degradation of women and chief target of colonialist propaganda.

In order for Muslim societies to progress toward civilization, the women in these societies would have to learn to dress and behave like European women.

Evelyn Baring, the 1st Earl of Cromer, was the British consul-general of Egypt from 1882 to 1907, and he made frequent use of feminist arguments in his attacks against Islam, claiming that Islam degraded women while Christianity elevated them, yet in England Cromer were a founding member and a president of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage! Prominent in his statements about Egypt was that only by abandoning the veil could Egypt reap the benefits of the introduction of Western civilization brought by the colonialists.[5]

Christian missionaries also focused on the role of women in Islamic societies to justify claims of the superiority of the Christian religion and the need for missionary activities in Muslim lands under the protection, of course, of colonialist military prowess.

In addition to colonialist rulers and missionaries, Western feminists also propagated the idea that Islamic precepts pertaining to women should be abandoned. Leila Ahmed states:

Others besides officials and missionaries similarly promoted these ideas, individuals resident in Egypt, for example. Well-meaning European feminists, such as Eugenie Le Brun (who took the young Huda Sha'rawi under her wing), earnestly inducted young Muslim women into the European understanding of the meaning of the veil and the need to cast it off as the essential first step in the struggle for female liberation.[6]

The legacy of colonialist feminism persisted through the neo-colonialist period to the present. Western feminists continue to criticize Muslim societies with special attention given to the veil, which is still seen by feminists as the symbol of the suppression of women by Islamic patriarchy.

Members of the upper classes in Muslim societies who adopted Western modes of dress, manners, home decor, and intellectual fashions also accepted colonialist feminism. The first feminists from the indigenous populations of colonialized countries were those of the upper classes who were educated in Europe or European schools.

Nationalist leaders in Muslim countries, such as Ataturk and Reza Shah, were the next to adopt the rhetoric of colonialist feminism as part of their programs of modernization. They were in basic agreement with to sort of values and worldview held by the colonialists.

They also agreed with the colonialists that their own cultures had to be reformed to come up to the standards of European civilization. Their only

difference with the colonialists was that they wanted to direct the program of modernization themselves. They would not allow Europeans to govern their countries, but they themselves would govern their countries as the Europeans would, or perhaps even more ruthlessly.

The values and fashions learned from the colonialists by the upper classes were to be imposed on the society as a whole. The most striking symbol of this was the attempt to outlaw traditional Islamic modes of dress.

In 1936, Reza Shah declared the emancipation of women and made women's Islamic covering illegal. In 1963, women were granted the right to vote, and in the Family Protection Act, polygamy was made illegal and women were given custody of their children in case of divorce.

The Family Protection Act was revoked after the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, when this law and many of the other measures introduced by feminists were denounced along with the rest of the colonialist legacy as contrary to the aims of Islam.

The connection between feminism and cultural imperialism is clearly indicated by Sachiko Murata:

It seems to me that feminists who have criticized various aspects of Islam or Islamic society base their positions upon a worldview radically alien to the Islamic worldview. Their critique typically takes a moral stance. They ask for reform, whether explicitly or implicitly. The reform they have in view is of the standard modern Western type. Among other things, this means that there is an abstract ideal, thought up by us or by our leader, which has to be imposed by overthrowing the old order. This reform is of the same lineage as the Western imperialism that originally appeared in the East as Christian missionary activity. The white man's burden gradually expanded its horizons-or reduced them, depending on how you look at it. Salvation was no longer touted as present in Christianity, but in science and progress.[7]

Prof. Murata goes on to observe that the feminist critique takes a decidedly moral stance for granted, and on the assumption that any sort of subordination of women to men is wrong and oppressive, goes on to denounce Islam, as well as most other traditional systems that contain rules governing gender relationships.

It is here that Muslims have to stop and ask whether the moral assumptions being used to condemn their religion are really acceptable. Islam has its own morals and jurisprudence grounded in a metaphysics that has been delineated through the course of centuries by Muslim philosophers, Gnostics and theologians.

The point is not that there can be no injustice in Islamic societies, but that Muslims will not be able to solve their social problems as Muslim by acquiescence to the social and cultural hegemony of the West.

Both feminine and masculine are double-edged swords. Each has a negative and a positive evaluation. If the rigidly “patriarchal” stress of some contemporary Muslims is to be softened, this can happen only when they place renewed stress on femininity as a positive quality and masculinity as a negative quality.

And Muslims will be able to do things as Muslims-not as imitation Westerners-only if they look once again at the spiritual and intellectual dimensions of their own tradition.[8]

Notes

1. See Sachiko Murata, The Tao of Islam (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), especially part 2.

2. H. A. Wolfson, The Philosophy of the Kaldm(Cambridge: Harvard, 1976).

3. Murata (1992), 55, 203-222.

4. This is explained in detail by Leila Ahmed in Women and Gender in Islam (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 150ff. Most of what follows in this section is a summary of information presented in Ahmed's work.

5. See Cromer's Modern Egypt, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1908), cited in Ahmed (1992), 152-153.

6. Ahmed (1992), 154.

7. Sachiko Murata, The Tao of Islam (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 4.

8. Murata (1992), 323.

Conclusion: The Islamic Struggle Against Feminism

The brief points made above, though sketchy, should be sufficient to show that the incompatibility of Islam with feminism is profound. It is not just a disagreement about how Islamic law is to be interpreted or what sort of rights should be accorded to women.

Islam and feminism have contradictory views on the most fundamental issues in metaphysics, ethics, social and political philosophy and theology.

Muslim women have also argued that feminism is an ideology relevant only to the lives of Western affluent women, and that even for them it has only resulted in making them into quasi men or sex objects. They have also pointed out that while Muslim women see their own most important roles to be mother and wife feminist ideology belittles the importance of these roles in its combat against gender stereotypes.

The most obvious marker of the struggle against feminism by Muslim women is Hijab (the canons of modesty in Islamic dress). While feminists have taken the scarf to be a symbol of their subjugation to men in Muslim societies, the faithful take it to be a symbol of respect and modesty.

The Prohibition By Islam Of The Oppression Of Women

No prohibition is given greater emphasis in Islam than that against injustice. In the Qur'an, particular attention is drawn to various areas in which there is a potential for injustice against women, but in general it is social acceptability and moral conscience to which appeal is made in order to discern what is just from what is oppression.

The laws of Islam set outer limits, but that does not mean that whatever falls within the perimeters is condoned. With respect to worship, for example, the law specifies the outward conditions for correct prayer, fasting and ritual purity, but one may offer formally correct prayer in ways considered repugnant (makruh) even with respect to external form. It is rather trite to mention, additionally, that validity of external form is no guarantee of interior soundness (ihsan).

According to a hadith related by both Shi'i and Sunni sources, on his last pilgrimage, the Prophet (s) said, “O people! Fear Allah regarding women, for you have taken them in trust from Allah.” Since what is taken in trust must be properly cared for, some scholars have allowed that the legal religious authorities may intervene even when there has been no explicit violation of Islamic precepts in case of mistreatment of a wife by her husband.[1]

The Misuse Of Islam For The Oppression Of Women

Islam has been and continues to be misused as an instrument for the oppression of women. This happens in various ways. Sometimes men take advantage of the position of women in Muslim societies to deny women opportunities that should be protected were Islam properly practiced. The dictates of Islam against injustice to women are simply ignored, and Islam itself is falsely used as an excuse for this.

An example of this is the way the Taliban in Afghanistan misuse precepts of sexual segregation to deny women educational opportunities and access to health and other facilities. Another way women are oppressed in Islam is

when the letter of the law is observed but its spirit is violated. Instances of this are too many to even begin giving examples. These are issues that need to be addressed by men and women in Muslim societies today.

Because of the abuses that exist, feminists argue that Islamic law should be changed, but there are other ways to fight abuse. More attention needs to be paid to the spirit of Islamic teaching. Islamic law should not be seen as a framework within which one can get away with whatever one likes with impunity.

Muslims need to be just as careful about the need to mold themselves according to the ideals taught by Islam as they are careful about conformity to its legal injunctions. The feminists seem to share the same blindness as those who use Islamic law as a pretext to oppress women, neither can see beyond the law to Islamic values and ideals.

The issue is addressed in some detail by Shahid Mutahhari who recognizes the problem and describes it as follows:

These cruelties are the outcome and an offshoot of a wrong conception of Islam, which, according to them, says: "A woman must bear such cruelties like a terminal cancer patient." This has created an impression of Islam that is more harmful than any of the evil propaganda against our faith.[2]

Shahid Mutahhari calls for the organization of Islamic women's movements in order to oppose the injustices done to women in Muslim society:

In our country we are in need of a women's movement, but we need a pure Islamic movement and not a dark and gloomy European movement.[3]

Muslim Women's Movements

Struggles for the elimination of oppression to women based on an acceptance of Islam may be termed Islamic women's movements. In the modern period, Islamic women's movements arose as a reaction against feminism, although they concerned themselves primarily with the improvement of the conditions of women in Muslim societies.

It is not always clear whether organizations and individuals base their struggle for the improvement of the conditions of women on Islam or on a feminist ideology disguised as acceptance of Islam. Nor is this a black and white distinction.

It appears that a considerable number of Muslim women influenced by feminist ideas sincerely believe that the proper interpretation of Islam is one that calls for absolute equality (i.e., identity) of rights for men and women and the elimination of all distinctions based on sex found in Islamic law as traditionally interpreted.

On the other hand, other Muslim women may sincerely but incorrectly believe that there are no valid arguments within Islamic jurisprudence for reform of the traditional interpretation of the law. So, among Muslim women's movements, as opposed to explicitly secularist feminist movements, we will find some to be firmly grounded on an attempt to be guided by God's final revelation as taught by His chosen Prophet, Muhammad (s), while others will attempt to manipulate the teachings of Islam for their own agendas, whether these are feminist or traditionalist

agendas, and there will be much gray area between pure faith and hypocrisy, as there always is in matters of religion.

Feminists have taken note of the great popular support for Islam among women in Muslim countries. Some have responded by calling the Muslim women foolish or duped. This seems to be the attitude of Leila Ahmed. She claims that women are attracted to the moral ideals of Islam and are unaware that the legal ramifications of Islamic law put women at a disadvantage. This is an incredible hypothesis, to say the least.

It is hard to imagine a Muslim woman who has not heard that Islam has different rules of inheritance for sons and daughters, let alone one who is unaware of sex based differences in the marriage laws.

Some feminists have admitted that the Islamic movement has actually improved the status of women, regardless of whether improvement is judged by feminist or other standards. Haleh Afshar admits that the revival of Islam after the victory of the Islamic Revolution has been "almost literally a God-send" in the context of which Iranian women have fought "against their political, legal and economic marginalization....Throughout, their arguments have been anchored in the teachings of Islam, the Koranic laws and the traditions and practices of the Prophet of Allah."[4]

Afshar's attitude appears to be that if Islamic rhetoric can be used to win feminist objectives, this can justify compromises with Islam. Ziba Mir-Hosseini seems to agree:

I argue that, contrary to what the early literature contends, and what remains implicit in the later wave, the impact of the revolution on women has been emancipatory, in the sense that it has paved the way for the emergence of a popular feminist consciousness.[5]

Mir-Hosseini, like Afshar, seems to think that it may be worthwhile making compromises with Islam in order to achieve feminist objectives. She refers to all women's movements as feminist, regardless of whether they are based on feminist ideology or Islam, although she offers the following conclusion about the indigenous 'feminism' she sees emerging in Iran:

This process has inadvertently been nurturing an indigenous 'feminism' which is as much rooted in Iranian family structures as it is in the interaction of Islamic and Western ideals of womanhood. It could emerge only after challenging and rejecting the state-sponsored and Western-inspired 'feminism' of the Pahlavis, as well as the liberal-leftist feminism of 1970's women's liberation, and yet in the process assimilating some of the features of both.[6]

We can only pray that Muslim women's movements comprising both Muslim women and Muslim men will continue to be advance in their struggle against injustice and will continue to provide an alternative to feminism so that the family is strengthened rather than undermined in loving obedience to the Most Merciful of the Merciful.

Notes

1. Murtaza Mutahhari, The Rights of Women in Islam (Tehran: WOFIS, 1991), 314, 309-312.

2. Mutahhari (1991), 306.

3. Mutahhari (1991), 66.

4. Haleh Afshar, "Women and the Politics of Fundamentalism in Iran," in Haleh Afshar, ed., Women and Politics in the Third World (London: Routledge, 1996), 126.

5. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Women and Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran," in Afshar (1996), 143.

6. Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1996), 163.

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